



EDUCATION, EDUCATION, EDUCATION

*Education about wood as a material and its uses is vitally important for the timber sector, writes **Jim Coulson***



It seems to me that people often mix up the terms “Education” and “Training” – and they will often put them together, as though they are more or less one and the same thing.

But strictly speaking, education is the very act of giving someone a body of knowledge that they can use to evaluate and interpret whatever it is they may come across; so that they can actually then make some sort of sense of it. (We always say we’ll have an

“educated guess” at something – never a “trained guess” at it!)

But training, on the other hand, is much more about giving someone a specific skill (or skillset) which can show them how to do a particular task in the right way, or perhaps in a better way than was previously possible.

To put it fairly crudely: education requires one to think, whereas training requires one just to do.

The “old” Institute of Wood Science courses – more recently taken up by the Wood Technology Society – were able to impart a genuinely useful body of knowledge about wood and its uses, that would stand one in good stead, even when one didn’t know everything.

That’s because to understand the “essence” of how wood worked and behaved, meant that one could often figure out what was happening, even if the particular circumstances were new or different.

Naturally, there are more job-specific training courses that can also be taken, to develop certain skills: such as timber grading or wood machining.

But it is particularly Wood Science and Timber Technology Courses – the essential education about wood as a material and its uses – that I want to talk about here.

Wood Science has had a bad press in recent times: many, even quite senior, figures in the timber trade have questioned what it is “good for”.

You only have to look at any job advert for timber sales people or branch managers in the pages of the *TTJ* to see that nobody ever suggests that “a sound knowledge of wood science would be an asset” when applying for such a job.

And yet that is surely a terrible indictment of our industry today!

When the Institute of Wood Science was founded in 1955 – just over 60 years ago – there was a real thirst for knowledge amongst the senior people in the trade.

Many of the younger people who were relatively junior in the 1960’s and 1970’s went on to have senior roles in the

Jim Coulson
FIMMM FFB is a
consulting wood
scientist and a
past president of
the Institute of
Wood Science, and
a member of the
Board of the Wood
Technology Society

trade in the 1980’s and 1990’s – largely on the back of their Wood Science Certificate qualifications. So where has all that enthusiasm gone?

Commercial pressures are of course partly to blame: but then ignorance can be extremely costly too!

It is my sincere hope that the timber trade will once again think that putting their staff through at least a “basic” wood science or timber technology course is worthwhile for the future – and a start, of sorts, is now being made.

There are actually thirty students now taking the Level 4 course in Wood Science and Timber Technology (which is more or less equivalent to the “old” Institute of Wood Science Certificate course).

These people, if successful, can then go on to apply to become members of the IOM3 – and of course, also the Wood Technology Society.

But – much more important than just the “letters after one’s name” (nice though they are to have, as a sense of pride in one’s achievements) – is the real, deep knowledge that those people will have acquired: and such knowledge will help not only them, but their employers and their customers too, well into the future.

Of course the timber trade needs to sell wood to survive: but I also believe that the trade needs to know wood, to survive, as well! ■

Below: Jim Coulson in one of the Wood Technology Society’s online timber education videos

